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LETTER

TO THE

Editors of the American Presbyterian,
and Genesee Evangelist.

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TO THE EDITORS OF THE AMERICAN PRESBYTERIAN.*

MY DEAR SIR:—

Whilst the transfer of my ecclesiastical relations from the New to the Old School Presbyterian Church is not an event of sufficient public interest to demand or authorize a letter on the subject, yet, as you have volunteered to assign, though in no unkind spirit, a reason for that step, which is not the one I would myself have given, and not that which determined the action of the larger portion of the congregation with which I am connected, I am compelled to embrace the opportunity afforded by your notice of my installation, to speak for myself touching the things whereof you have written.

Having already intimated that no “particular views of slavery” entered into the considerations which led to the organization of the Westminster Church of this place, it may be well to state, also, that no antipathy towards those in the New School branch, who have been true to the Presbyterian standards and polity, has been for a moment entertained. Indeed, such have been our relations to not a few in

* The occasion of this letter will be found in the Appendix.

that body, that the great trial of our ecclesiastical lives has been to separate ourselves from those with whom we once took "sweet counsel together, and walked to the house of God in company." It is impossible to regard with other than reverent affection, the persons and memory of those, from whose lips we first heard the messages of salvation; whose forms are inseparably associated with the most important eras of our religious existence; and whose words and services comforted and sustained the living and dying hours of those we have most loved on earth, and with whom we hope to dwell in heaven.

Having said thus much, it is but just to add, that whilst with many in the congregation, ancestral association and a love for the truth, as set forth in the Old School exhibitions of the Way of Salvation, have been determining causes in their alliance with our organization, yet, not a few, as in all churches, have been drawn to us, more by local considerations, personal attachments and social affinities, than by any thing else. I desire, therefore, to be understood as speaking not so much for those with whom I am associated as for myself, when I say that many, who have no special views of slavery to advocate, and who are willing to leave that subject with those who are so amply able to take care of it, are yet deeply grieved at the support which the New School body has, in various ways, given to Abolitionism; and are

now seriously pondering the question, "whether this disposition to sustain, or, if you prefer it, this hesitancy to rebuke an unscriptural and disastrous fanaticism, is not the legitimate fruit of what is distinctive in the New School material and theology?"

Nor in making this statement, do we charge any pastor or elder in the New School church with being an Abolitionist. We are well aware, that many of its leading ministers and laymen are sternly opposed to this evil. From such we have the most cordial concurrence of opinion, when we aver, that the support which the New School Assemblies have given to the evil referred to, by withholding any official remonstrance with the American Home Missionary Society; by continuing to use its agency as a thing approved; and by persisting in the infliction of exasperating resolutions against slave-holding Christians; is a cause of grief and shame, and a thing to be repented of and renounced, before the New School body can set itself right in the sight of the Christian world, or retain its moral hold on men who take the Scriptures for their rule of faith, and embrace in their gospel esteem, all who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. Without any view of slavery different from that entertained by Alexander, and Baxter, and Witherspoon, and J. H. Rice, and other representative men of the Presbyterian Church, we must express the conviction, that the New School body has

given its influence to the support of Abolitionism, and that there is in its antecedents, its elements and its theology, that which forbids the hope that that influence will be withdrawn.

In confirming this statement, it may be well not to forget, that Abolitionism is a thing of itself. Very distinctly defined, is it, now, as to its elements, its spirit, its principles, and its fruits. In its substantial features, it has existed in all ages of the world. It is true, that the system of African slavery has awakened its activity, and called it once more into view; yet Abolitionism is not a new thing in its essence or its lineaments. It is simply a fanaticism; the fanaticism of the races. And fanaticism, whether of the Brand, the Symbol, the Faggot, or the Blood, is every where one and the same. It defies Scripture; is fierce; denunciatory; uncharitable; unscrupulous; and often better pleased with the destruction and extermination of those against whom its antagonism is kindled, than with their reformation. Isaac Taylor thus describes it:

“It is the well-being of his fellow-men,” says the zealot, “which incites his endeavors; and yet nothing in his style or mien bespeaks philanthropy. A disposition the very reverse of good-will, one would assign to him. His eye can glare upon wretchedness close at his feet, and in most melancholy forms, and yet forget that he sees. His sympathies are with remote

sufferers; his zeal against distant evils. Nay, into the cup of human woe he can himself pour the bitterest ingredients." He can lacerate souls already bleeding, and wounded to the quick, at the readily acknowledged evils by which they are surrounded, and which now it is out of their power to remove. How many a conscientious and once mistaken parent mourns over the calamities which have fallen on his children, and by reason of his own errors in family government. But the fanatic is not satisfied with this parent's silent suffering. He must make him writhe. He must hold him up to shame. He must depict his case, intensely exaggerated, in books of fiction and call upon the world to jeer at and calumniate him. He must at last call in question the lawfulness of the parental relation itself, holding the relation responsible for its abuses. He must persuade churches and ecclesiastical assemblies to pass resolutions against any upon whom the Tower of Siloam may fall. He must make supplication for such in public, as sinners above all the Galileans.—All this he can do, and still persuade himself that it is zeal for God and suffering humanity, which prompts his utterances. He cannot be made to think that those from whom he differs in opinion, have also a conscience; or that from the same Bible from which he professes to obtain all his knowledge, they can obtain any light; or that the sight of a Saviour's sufferings, or the Sacrament of

the Supper, commemorated and honored, can create any sense of mercy in their hearts; or that the descent and indwelling of the Holy Ghost can confer on them any wisdom. His cry is, "They must think as we do, or be cut off. From such, withhold the gospel."

"Instead of admitting for a moment, the modest supposition, that the fair interpretation of the Scripture may perhaps contain more than his anathematizing canon will allow, every artifice of an elaborate sophistry is employed to keep such a supposition out of view." With the fanatic, prejudice, and a notion of what belongs to man in ideal conditions, are his guides. His prompting is antagonism to a certain class of minds, of whose superiority he has an apprehension, and sometimes a dread. A lurking doubt of his own position, makes him shun argument, or investigation. The mere suggestion to re-examine his opinions in the light of Scripture irritates him. The definition by which the distinguished individual already alluded to describes this malady, is "A combination of spurious pietism, with the malign emotions. And it is not a bad definition of abolitionism. Irrational in its measures, intemperate in its words, unchastened in its spirit, it hesitates not to call that sin, which God has never called so.

Severely condemnatory in its tone, it spares not gray hairs, nor bleeding hearts. Unscrupulous in its

statements, it charges on an entire class, what, if there is any ground for the charge, is found only among a few, and those not of the household of faith, and continues to repeat its rebukes long after there is every reason to believe that they contribute, above all other things combined, to defeat the purpose avowed in the rebuke.

Such is abolitionism wherever it has appeared. And there is not a village or church at the North, in which it has not shown itself. Yet to the support of this evil, the New School Presbyterian Church has lent its influence, repeatedly and deliberately. It did so, in uttering no word of rebuke as a church, when its Home Missionary Agency refused to send the gospel to slave-holding churches. It did so, in the exasperating and unjustifiable resolves of seven successive assemblies. It did so, in permitting an edict to be uttered and sent forth at Cleveland, which the Christian self-respect of six Synods could notice only by heeding the apostolic precept, "From such withdraw thyself." It did so, in taking no pains to heal the lacerated sensibilities of deeply-wronged Southern Christians. It did so, in preserving the profoundest silence in regard to the spirit, words, measures, principles, or fruits of abolitionism, and at the same time, uttering rebuke after rebuke, against the evils of slavery. If the influence of the New School Presbyterian Church is not now given to abolitionism, why

have churches, which from their zeal on anti-slavery, had separated themselves from it, begun to return to its embrace, declaring that now, it and they are one? If its influence is not given to abolitionism, why are abolitionists so rejoiced at its position? why do their journals exult? When the wise and godly men, who in silence mourn over this alliance, and who are not the men to see a great wrong committed amongst themselves, against a portion of Christ's body, and to witness the solemnly entrusted power of their church perverted under sectional prejudice without remonstrance, shall have determined on their mode of uttering their protest, you will know how widespread is the sentiment that the New School Presbyterian Church has given its influence to the support of abolitionism. Nor is there any reason to believe, that the influence thus surrendered and devoted to evil, can be withdrawn from that evil.

Observe the increase which abolitionism has made in its hold on the New School Church, from the passage of the Resolutions in the Assembly of 1850, up to those of 1857; and it will be found to consist, not only in the uncalled-for repetition of offensive and irritating measures, but in the insidious introduction of papers and phrases which assert not merely naked and hypothetical abstractions, but which refuse to admit the innocence and lawfulness of the slaveholding relation as it actually exists in the church.

Such papers as Judge Allison now remonstrates against, and says he would "never have agreed to," and for most emphatic reasons; such papers as his associates on the committee, from Ohio and Illinois, persist in saying, were passed in his presence, and with his assent; papers, which received at last, with the exception of two, the entire vote of the Northern members of the Assembly.

When an evil has thus fastened itself on to the opinions and principles, as well as on to the measures of as large a portion of the delegates of a church, as voted for the edict enacted at Cleveland, is there any hope that it will extricate itself from it, unless many others were deceived as Judge Allison was, as to the nature of the document adopted?

When a body of men are left to do such things, is there not reason to believe that the evil has touched their mind; and that re-instatement in the truth is for the church as a whole, beyond its reach?

There are reasons also *in the elements* of which the New School body is composed, and in its *distinctive theological tenets*, which favor the inroads of abolitionism. The new material of the New School Church consists, to no small extent, of persons from sections of the country, where an intense prejudice prevails against whatever is from the South.

Whilst it is true that New England and the Middle States, by the tongues and pens of their more eminent

divines, by the letters and speeches of statesmen ever to be illustrious in the nation's annals, and by the personal influence of a solid, and at the same time *cultivated & orthodox* population, have done more than any other portion of the world to arrest the progress of the destructive fanaticism; yet, among the more common and illiterate people of these States, as also among the well educated portion who reject the righteousness of Christ as the ground of their salvation, intolerance prevails, in proportion to their ignorance of the Scriptures, and their insensibility to the Apostolic injunction, "Let none of you suffer as a busy-body in other men's matters." These persons are not easily and immediately to be convinced of the elevation and purity of slave-holding Christians.

The denial by one portion of them of a deep personal depravity, and the want of a proper intuitive or acquired courtesy in the other, make, the whole together, far less alive to any beam that is in their own eyes, and far more capable of noticing and discoursing upon any real or imaginary mote in another's, than is desirable. Yet all are not equally to blame. And a large portion of them are not wholly incurable. Many, by the re-action of their own exaggerated statements in unspeakable sorrows around their own hearth-stones, have been led to inquire, may we not have erred in directing to so great an extent, our own thoughts and those of our children and friends

to the sins, we were told, existed at the South? Have we not erred also as to the feelings which we entertained towards slave-holders, and the way in which we spoke of them and wrote about them? Some have asked, whether, what they were told, was true? Whilst a few are entertaining the inquiry, whether there is not piety and intelligence sufficient in the Southern church to detect their own failings, and sin enough in the Northern church and heart to occupy all its time and strength.

But in the meantime, the emigration and insertion of untutored and unhumbled material into the New School connection goes on; whilst the church as a church takes no measures to remonstrate with it, or correct it, but, permits resolutions and acts to stand, which fortify it, in its mistaken opinions, and its unlovely spirit, and strengthen its hands for evil. Does not this church owe a duty of instruction, of kindly persuasion, and of scriptural exposition to its members on this subject?

Whilst it may not repair the breach in its own ranks, yet may it not do much to lift the burden which it has laid on the Southern heart, and thus remove the obtuseness which it may have induced on the Southern conscience? The unwise and persistent fulminator of rebukes must know, that the tendency of his folly is to extort a louder cry than ever, from the slaves of unconverted masters, of "no man pities

my bondage, no man careth for my soul:" Not for the sake of the Southern minister and Christian; (these need no admonition outside of their own hearts and their own Bibles; and these have ever been prompt to do their part towards the alleviation of African suffering, and the elevation of the African race; and would be still;) but for the sake of the Northern people and the slave, cannot the Northern church be persuaded to exercise that common sense, and exhibit that instinctive delicacy, that gospel charity, humility and generosity, which alone have ever availed in the redemption of this lost world? Instead of suggesting measures of reform for the South, which, under the exasperation induced by unwarrantable interference, must be of no avail, why not aid and bless that Southern church, in their *own* measures for alleviating the bond-child's sorrows? why not erase and condemn as unwise, expostulatory and officious resolutions and words from every book and every tongue? and with such a love as the abolitionist will pray Christ to show to him, when the mountains of his transgressions rise up before him at the judgment, love the slave-holder, and pity and instruct his maligner? Why not do unto others in the matter, of what you call, their sins, we would say to the anti-slavery zealot, as you would have others do unto you, in the matter of your own or your child's sins? Why not weep in silence, and

pray, and cherish the first indication of lofty resolve and gospel improvement, even if it does not come by your suggestion, and in your way? Why not trust Christ, and believe that He walks among His ransomed ones at the South, loving and teaching them, as He did among his disciples on Galilee's lake, and as He does throughout the wide Christian kingdoms?

Out of what anomalous perversion of Christian doctrine or precept has arisen this false method of expostulation and rebuke! How many manacles have been rivetted; how many fresh stripes, inflicted; how many intentions to emancipate, quenched; as the exasperation occasioned by Northern insult, wreaked its vengeance on the offending occasion of this pitiless abuse! And shall not a Christian church, in sorrow for the human misery which it has augmented, as well as for the iniquitous spirit which it has indulged and occasioned, repent of its alliance with abolitionism, and publicly renounce it?

The special difficulty which the New School Church will have in taking this step, a step which would redound to the honor of the entire Northern States; a step which would render mellow and tender the heart of every Christian slave-holder, and procure emancipating acts on the one side, and abundant contributions on the other, lies, in the distinctive features of the New School theology. The spirit demanded of the Northern church and people, is a

spirit which will renounce as folly and sin, its own wisdom and its self-righteousness. And where the righteousness of Christ is regarded as the sole ground of a sinner's acceptance with God, there is some hope of this.

Hence the Old School Presbyterian Church has shown no wide-spread proclivities for abolitionism. Its sense of the human soul's utter depravity, and absolute dependence on Christ for any right state of mind for ever so short a time, tempers and qualifies, if it does not restrain, its rebuke of offences remote from its own eye, or under the eye of those in whose wisdom and piety they can confide as to the mode in which rebuke or counsel shall be administered.

But the New School Presbyterian Church, has not this security. It is allied with many who repudiate the doctrine of the imputed righteousness of Christ as essential to justification, whilst it admits only the necessity of His substituted sufferings as the ground of pardon. It places the human will, and the human soul, in an attitude by no means as impotent for self-recovery and renovation, as is the fact; and as millions of the redeemed, have, with Augustine, felt and avowed. Hence it can never shrink from and abhor the conceit and intolerance of self-righteous reformers, as it would, were its belief in the righteousness of Christ as the only ground of salvation, prevalent and

profound. Hence Unitarians are almost universally abolitionists.

And so, to a great extent, are Universalists; and so, are very many infidels; indeed, abolitionism has produced infidelity to a vast extent, not so much by the abstractions which it teaches, which are erroneous enough, as by the spirit which it fosters. It ignores humility, it deals not in anathemas against its *own* sins, yet the first lesson of the Gospel is, "Lord, have mercy on me a sinner;" and the last—"Father, forgive them, they know not what they do."

May we all receive these lessons in their sweetness, and fulness of mercy, and breathe their spirit most especially in every expostulatory word, in every reforming work.

Very respectfully yours,

HENRY NEILL.

DETROIT, *Feb. 4th*, 1858.

APPENDIX.

THAT portion of the article in the American Presbyterian, which relates to the transfer of Mr. Neill's ecclesiastical relations to the Old School Assembly, and the Westminster Church at Detroit is as follows:

“The Rev. Mr. Neill was born in this city, and was trained up in the First Presbyterian Church. He graduated at Amherst College, and pursued his theological studies chiefly in Lane Seminary. He was first settled in the ministry in Hatfield, Mass., and subsequently in Lenox, in the same State, from whence he removed to take charge of one of the three churches in Detroit, which were formed by the division of the First Presbyterian Church, and, while pastor of that church, he was connected with the Presbytery of Detroit, (N. S.) He is understood to have left that Presbytery, and to have transferred his relations to a church and Presbytery of the “Old School,” in consequence of opinions which he has long cherished on the subject of slavery, and which he regards as better represented by the position of the old School Assembly than by that of the New School, and especially in consequence of the recent action of the Assembly at Cleveland.

It is one of the privileges which are recognized in our views of Christian liberty, that every man has

the right to connect himself with that particular denomination of Christians which accords most with his views of Church order and doctrine; in which he can enjoy the best means of preparing for heaven; and in which, if a minister of the gospel, he can do most to extend the common faith, and best promote the kingdom of the Redeemer. We have no reason to doubt that Mr. Neill has been directed in the change which he has made by these considerations. Personally we can entertain no feelings towards Mr. Neill but entire kindness; we have no desire respecting him, in the new connection which he has chosen, but his increasing and enlarged usefulness, and happiness.

Mr. Neill is a man who is generous, large-hearted, and sincere. He is a true and faithful friend; and in his domestic relations he is eminently attractive and lovely. He is blessed by nature with a warm heart, which has been cultivated by grace, and with a glowing and brilliant imagination which finds delight in the highest themes of religion, and which is as often brilliantly displayed in private conversation as in the pulpit. He has powers, as a preacher, which are fitted to attract and to hold a congregation of intelligence and piety; and he deserves, as he will receive, the esteem of those who love Zion. We differ from him in our judgment of the step which he has taken, but we have no desire to throw the slightest impediment in the way of his usefulness in his new field of labor. * * *

Mr. Neill has made the change, as we understand and have above stated, mainly from the supposed

position of the two Assemblies on the subject of slavery: it *may be* that others will do the same thing. But they who desire to find peace by such a change, will find none. The days of stern and severe warfare for such persons, on the subject of slavery, are to come. The "*frying-pan*" has been tried; the experiment by "*fire*" is yet to come. The struggle in the New School body is over: that in the Old School is to come." * * *